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GRIEG: AN ESTIMATE.

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN.

It is a singular fact, for which one need not pretend to account, that in musical criticism (the youngest, most unreasoned and most unguided of the arts) one is seldom made aware that a distinction has been drawn between what Matthew Arnold liked to call the "real" and the "historic" estimates. Yet it is difficult to see how we can arrive at any just appraisal of music or of creative musicians unless this vital difference is held steadily before the mind. For example, it has been perfectly possible for modern critics, recognizing only the historic estimate, blithely to rank the admirable Haydn as a major symphonist; yet imagine—one need not say Arnold, but any sensitive and responsible critic of letters—ranking, for example, Pope as a major poet! Arnold, it will be recalled, in defining what he means by the "historic estimate" of poetry, observes: "the course of development of a nation's language, thought and poetry, is profoundly interesting; and by regarding a poet's work as a stage in this course of development we may easily bring ourselves to make it of more importance as poetry than in itself it really is": that is, we may fall easily into the error of mistaking the historic significance of the "*Chanson de Roland*," or of the verse of Pope, or Dryden, for an essential significance which, as poetry, it does not possess. We may fall, through carelessness or indifference, into such an error; but we do not expect a deliberate and reasoned criticism of letters to exhibit carelessness or indifference: we do not expect it to fail of distinguishing between the artistic stature of Pope and Shelley, of Dryden and Keats. Yet how often does our musical criticism distinguish in its judgments between a purely historic estimate and a real estimate of Haydn, of much of Mozart, of the lesser Beethoven? The

reason, it may be said again, is not germane to this discussion: the fact alone is pertinent.

Of Edvard Grieg, the most widely and sincerely popular music-maker since Mendelssohn, it would be easy to say that it is not now possible, since he has been dead less than a half-year, to form any historic estimate which should be in the least conclusive. The objection would not be a valid one: Grieg's relation to the past of musical art, to its development, to its present condition—even to its auguries of the future—is not in the least difficult to perceive. But it is, I conceive, far more interesting and rewarding to view his art in itself; to attempt to arrive at an estimate of its absolute, rather than its historic, significance.

Let us consider first, as a convenient point of approach, the claims which have been made for him, and the faults which have been charged against his art. The most persistent, and the most absurd, claim that has been advanced for him is that he was pre-eminent as an exponent of nationalism in music. It is a claim which is as negligible as it is unsubstantiated. We could still afford to ignore this aspect of his art even if it were not true, as Mr. Henry T. Finck, in his inimitable survey of Grieg's career and works, affirms, that instead of exclaiming over his music: "How delightfully Norwegian!" we should say: "How delightfully Griegian!" That Grieg, an ardent and uncompromising patriot, made much of his artistic allegiance to Norwegian soil is of little significance. As the French critic, Ernest Closson, wrote, "Grieg has so thoroughly identified himself with the musical spirit of his country that the rôles have become, as it were, reversed. His personality—a personality which in itself has nothing in common with the music of the people—seems to have become the prototype of this same music of the people; and the composers, his compatriots, imitate and copy him quite innocently in the belief that they are simply making use of local color." It is not intended to dispose too summarily or cavalierly of a principle which to a very large number of intelligences is of deep import; but it remains an indisputable fact that "nationalism" in music has never constituted a valid claim to creative eminence. Who are those in musical art who have been conspicuous as exponents of nationalism? Not Bach, not Beethoven, not Schubert, not Schumann, not Wagner, not Brahms, not Tschaikowsky; rather they have been minor prophets like Dvorák

and certain of the Russians—those Liszt-sprung “barbarians” whose music is far more eloquent of the salon and the academy than of the forests and steppes. Therefore, one may be permitted, with all possible deference, to leave the question of Grieg’s Scandinavianism to specialists in the discovery and exploitation of æsthetic patriotism, where it will be sure of adequate discussion.

Claims have been made for Grieg, upon the purely artistic side, which have done his fame a very positive harm. He was called “the greatest of living composers, with the possible exception of Saint-Saëns”—an amazing exception! It has been said that he “has created the latest harmonic atmosphere in music”; that he “is one of the most original geniuses in the musical world of the present or past”; that his songs, in melodic wealth, are surpassed only by Schubert’s; that in “originality of harmony and modulation” he is surpassed only by Bach, Schubert, Chopin, Schumann, Wagner and Liszt; that in his orchestration he “ranks among the most fascinating.” These claims have been deliberately and responsibly made, and they have been passionately defended; yet that they can have been seriously urged seems well-nigh incredible. It will be judicious to avoid, for the present, so parlous a question as that which is raised by the brave phrase, “the greatest living composer”; but as to “the latest harmonic atmosphere in music,” Grieg’s harmony, in comparison with that of Claude Debussy, sounds as comfortably unventuresome as do the naïve metres of Herrick beside the strange rhythms and subtle assonances of Mr. Yeats. As to the melodic wealth of his songs, do they surpass in this respect the songs of Schumann or of Franz? In “originality of harmony” does Grieg compare for a moment with Vincent d’Indy, with Richard Strauss, with Charles Martin Loeffler? As for his “fascinating orchestration,” where does it stand in comparison with the gorgeously imaginative scoring of Rimsky-Korsakoff, the superb instrumentation of Strauss, the exquisite orchestral mastery of Debussy and Loeffler?—magicians beside whom Grieg, for all the delicacy and charm of his scoring, seems like a tentative amateur. Does the music of the Norwegian tone-poet deserve, is it helped by, such ruthless, wholesale, and inconsiderate praise?

On the other hand, let us see what certain of his detractors have found to urge against his art. The disapproval of

his critics has been most pithily summed up, perhaps, by Mr. Daniel Gregory Mason, who reproaches Grieg because, he holds, he "is never large or heroic"; because "he never wears the buskin." "He has neither the depth of passion nor the intellectual grasp needed to make music in the grand style." Probably of all his peculiarities, complains Mr. Mason, "the most significant is the shortness of his phrases and his manner of repeating them almost literally, displaced a little in pitch, but not otherwise altered. . . . His thoughts complete themselves quickly; they have little span, and they are combined, not by interfusion, but by juxtaposition. He never weaves a tapestry; he assembles a mosaic." Intricacy of design, largeness of span, synthetic power, are qualities to be recognized and applauded; but are they essential to a masterpiece? Have they, finally, anything to do with the matter? What innate superiority, *per se*, has "a broad-spanned arch of melody," a phrase of large sweep and wide scope, over a "short-breathed" phrase? Consider, for instance, that extremely familiar masterpiece-in-little, the dirge, "*Aase's Tod*," from the first "Peer Gynt" suite. "Short-breathed" in structure it undeniably is, wholly naïve in its contrivance; yet is it any less deeply and largely tragic, less fine and memorable, less admirable a masterpiece, for being so? What, in the end, have bulk and magnitude, intricacy and elaborateness of plan, to do with the case? Is it true, as a somewhat impatient appreciator of Grieg has lately affirmed, that artists who have carried their inspiration "through a long and arduous process of eloquent exposition" are necessarily to be more greatly honored than those who have completed their inspiration within a briefer flight? The contention has, beyond doubt, a deceptive force: a great epic seems, at first glance, obviously superior to a great lyric. There is Schubert's "*Eralkönig*," a superb song, of long flight, of broad scope; there is his "*Der Tod und das Mädchen*," also a superb song; but it is very short: it is only forty-three measures long, while the "*Eralkönig*" is one hundred and forty-eight measures long. Moreover, "*Der Tod und das Mädchen*," despite its sombre exaltation, is utterly simple in structure, while the "*Eralkönig*" is elaborate in form and rich in contrast. Or, take another instance: The E-major Intermezzo, opus 116 (No. 2), and the Third Symphony of Brahms are both authentic masterpieces; the first is among the most perfect of modern piano works in

the smaller forms, the second is one of the noblest of modern symphonies; in quality of inspiration there is nothing to choose between them. Is the symphony, then, by reason of superior bulk, a more eminent masterpiece? "There is no perfect lyric," Mr. Arthur Symons has finely and truly said—and the sentence is an answer to the question which has just been asked: "there is no perfect lyric which is made less great by the greatness of even a perfect drama."

The truth of the matter, as we must apply it in Grieg's case, is that it is not duration of inspiration, but quality of inspiration, which counts, and which somehow must be determined and appraised. Is Grieg's accent the accent of great music, of music of the first class; has it the accent, not necessarily of the few supreme masters, but of authentic inspiration? Has it any of the essential characteristics of the best music? One may, not too dogmatically, say that these essential characteristics are: ideas, individuality, imagination—I say nothing of "beauty," for that way lie inescapable pitfalls. By "ideas" one means definite and specific musical conceptions which persuade at once by their saliency, their eloquence, their distinction; and these concepts may be melodic, harmonic or rhythmic. "Individuality" and "imagination" are, of course, self-explanatory terms. To attempt to test all music by an application of these three touchstones would probably lead one, before long, into a critical quagmire; but they are of excellent service for purposes of classification. Let us say, for example, that in the music of Tschaikowsky we find extreme richness and fervor of imagination, vivid individuality, but not an abundance of distinguished or noble ideas; that in the music of his brilliant countryman, Rimsky-Korsakoff, we find extraordinary and audacious imagination, but little individuality and few ideas; that in the music of Saint-Saëns we find neither imagination, important and memorable ideas, nor vital and persuasive individuality (his technical expertness, his admirable craftsmanship, is a virtue which one takes for granted in a modern musician); that, to pass to the other extreme, we find, in the music of such men as Wagner and Beethoven, superlative ideas, puissant individuality, and boundless imagination. Now where, in this category, does Grieg belong? With the men whose supreme distinction lies in the transcendent quality of their ideas? or with the men of restless and flaming, or exquisite,

imagination? or with the men whose individuality is indubitable, but who lack salient and original ideas and richness of imagination—men of the stamp of Mendelssohn, Massenet, Puccini, Goldmark?

Let us say that Grieg possesses, in a measure, all of these excellences; but he possesses them in an unequal degree. He is sometimes truly imaginative, as in passages in the "*Peer Gynt*" suite, in the last two sonatas for violin and piano (opus 13 and opus 45), in certain of the piano pieces. He has, too, achieved ideas: ideas of exquisite distinction, of noble breadth. But they lack the stamp of supreme excellence; to resort to a literary analogy, his inspiration never attains to the kind of utter and perfect felicity which is represented, in poetic art, by such lines as these:

"The sunrise blooms and withers on the hill
Like any hillflower; and the noblest troth
Dies here to dust!"

There is music—music by Wagner, by Brahms, by Debussy—which is as beautiful, as supremely felicitous, as these lines; but Grieg does not command it. He is often captivating and delicious, eloquent and impassioned—as in many of his lovely songs; there is free and vigorous spontaneity, an infectious vitality, in the violin sonatas; in the slow movement of the beloved piano concerto there is an infinite sweetness, there is ravishing tenderness; in the dirge from the "*Peer Gynt*" music there is a quality of sadness and beauty which rebukes description. To praise such things as these is as necessary as it is delightful. Yet, as it has been said, they do not belong among the class of the very best, delectable and striking as they are.

But, in a surpassing degree, Grieg has individuality—individuality that is pervasive, indubitable. That, one feels, is his distinguishing possession. His accent is unmistakable. His speech may sway one, or it may not; but always the voice is the voice of Grieg. You recognize it at once; there is no mistaking it. He has, beyond denial, his own distinguishing way of saying things, his own idioms, his own mannerisms, if you will. You hear a phrase, say, from one of the lesser known sonatas for piano and violin, and you exclaim at once: "*Grieg!*" For the music is as redolent of him, and of none other, as, say,

"O cloud-pale eyelids, dream-dimmed eyes. . ."

is redolent of Mr. Yeats, or as the recorded vision:

"Fair as in the flesh she swims to me on tears"

is redolent of Mr. Meredith. The music of Grieg, when he is at his best, is drenched in personality, in individual color. It is curiously his own, curiously free from the reflection of other minds and other temperaments. In its earlier condition it reminds one at times of Chopin, of Schumann, of Mendelssohn, occasionally of Wagner; in its later stages it suggests no one but Grieg himself. Then, at such times, it is a rare voice that speaks, a voice of penetrating sweetness, a tender and vibrant voice, a voice of incomparable freshness and limpidity—no music-maker since Schubert has uttered tones so liquid and free, so spontaneous, unwearied and unworn. There have been others who spoke more entrancingly, more profoundly, more nobly, more subtly, with more importunate and commanding beauty; there are to-day, among those who but a short while ago were Grieg's contemporaries, music-makers who surpass this delectable lyrist in scope and vigor of imagination and fineness of thought. Yet Grieg is admirable in this: he wears no one's mantle; he borrows no man's speech. In his most characteristic outgivings—and he has produced little that is not charged to the brim with his own peculiar quality—there are no alien flavors. His wine is not the nectar of the gods of music, but it is from his own vineyard; there is none other like it.

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